

Cuba, Castro and Anti-Semitism

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Abstract The Soviets provided Cuba with the model of attacking human rights activities and organizations as a necessary extension of the Jewish Zionist conspiracy. The identification of Castro with forces dedicated to the destruction of Israel was made plain in proclamation and practice. The Cuban position is that the war on terrorism is actually an example of “Liberation Imperialism.” Cubans make no reference to the repeated assaults on Israel, or the actual causes of the Middle East conflict—the denial of the right of Israel to exist as a Nation-State in that region. Anti-Semitism is so powerfully rooted as a cultural element in authoritarian cultures that even when, as in the case of Cuban communism, it entails the tortured twisting of doctrinal elements within Marxism–Leninism, such as doctrinal claims about the “materialist foundations of society,” its leaders will sacrifice the ideology to the reality. Part of the Castro attachment to communism is an overall contempt for the Jewish mini-Diaspora within the larger flight of Cubans to the United States and other places where the practice of free speech remain unimpeded. The regime of Fidel Castro has changed little in the past 49 years, compared to the rest of the world.

Keywords Communism · Jihadist · Zionist · Nazism · Hostility

Introduction

Karl Marx, in his brilliant historical study of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, starts out by reminding us that “Hegel says somewhere that all great historic facts and personages recur twice. He forgot to add: ‘once as tragedy, and again as farce’.”

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With the holding in the year 2006 of the repeat meetings of the so-called “Non aligned Nations” that first met in Cuba forty years ago, in 1966, we are reminded once more how little the Fidel Castro regime has changed and how much the world has changed in that time span. Nations like India that spearheaded the first such meeting have developed amazing strides toward both democracy and market enterprise, while others like Venezuela have gone from a world that produced a democratic leader such as Romulo Betancourt to a military dictator like Hugo Chavez.

But the constancy of the Castro attachment to communism remains as real in theory and as remote in practice now as it was then. Part of this attachment was an emerging hostility to Israel and overall contempt for the Jewish mini-Diaspora within the larger flight of Cubans to the United States and other places where the practice of free speech remains unimpeded. With new allies such as Iran, Syria and the Palestine Liberation factions in Gaza and the West Bank, that hostility—fueled by decades of imbibing the Soviet legacy—has hardened into a primary credo. The remnants of the Jewish community in Havana, notwithstanding, Cuba is one more nation where anti-Semitism without Jews is a core belief.

In language strongly reminiscent of the Nazi epoch in German history and its main organ of propaganda, *Der Stürmer*, the Cuban Communist regime and its main organs of propaganda, Radio Havana and Granma, launched an unprecedented assault on the Israeli struggle against Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon. Characteristically for the Castro ideological machinery, Hezbollah was simply not mentioned. Instead, the conflict was pictured as an ongoing Israeli struggle—one that pits “arrogant Jews, armed to the teeth by the United States” against Palestine and Lebanon. The rubber-stamp Cuban National Assembly, even with ailing leader hospitalized, obediently expressed its condemnation of the “Zionist entity” as a “horrendous and shameless action, a genocide which challenges universal public opinion, laughs at the United Nations, and threatens to invade other countries, reminiscent of the era of Nazism.”

There are unique dimensions to the vanguard role of the Cuban regime in its hostility to Israel. Not least is that Cuba is essentially a country lacking anything resembling a viable Jewish community. Indeed, estimates range from between twelve to fifteen hundred Jewish souls in a nation that in 1959, at the time of the Castro seizure of power, contained ten times that number, or between twelve thousand and fifteen thousand Jewish citizens. Therefore, by even a cursory examination of the Castro regime attitude toward Israel it is worth noting the special character of its Jews at home. Despite the attempt to downplay, even eradicate awareness of Cuba as an anti-Semitic environment, one hostile to Jews, it must be noted that until recently the American hard Left has continued to make distinctions between anti-Israeli from anti-Jewish behavior by the regime. Thus the mythological nature of this dualism requires at least a cursory examination.

The typical apologetic Leftist approach is to claim that the regime’s anti-Zionist record “does not stem from anti-Semitic sentiment but from a purely self-interested approach to international relations.” Indeed, the author of these words, Aleksandra Brikman, in a web site paper ironically entitled “Cuba: A Haven for Jews?,” goes so far as to claim that “the Cuban government’s position has always been and continues to be favorable and responsive towards the needs of its Jewish community.”

The sheer demographic facts of the Castro Era would tend to cast serious doubt on such a bromide. Ninety percent of the Jewish community left Cuba soon after 1959. Indeed, only in the mid-1990s was Cuba declared to be not so much an “atheistic state” but one open to multiple religious beliefs. This indicates a widespread contempt for religions in general, one that fell with special fury on the Jewish community. The very magnitude of the Catholic population inhibited, even if not prohibited, direct assaults on the majority faith in Cuba.

There are a variety of sources of anti-Semitism in Cuba, several of which predate the rise of the Castro regime. In the pre-Castro era, the most dangerous period for Jews was in 1938–1939, when German Nazi influence in Cuba was at its height. The crowning propagandistic moment in the period before the birth of Israel, was the refusal of its then President (Bru) and the Cuban government to permit the landing of the S.S. Saint Louis in Havana harbor in 1939. Nazi Minister Joseph Goebbels fabricated and hyped up the passengers’ criminal nature, making them undesirable. Nazi agents within Cuba stirred anti-Semitism and organized protests, making the idea of an additional one thousand refugees seem to be a threat against Cuba itself. Negotiations for Jewish lives followed a pattern typical during the earlier phase of the Nazi era: fixing a price for the survival of each Jew. The most authoritative report at the time indicated that the Cuban government wanted five hundred dollars per refugee (approximate a half million US dollars in total). It was said that this money was no more than the amount required for any refugee to obtain visa to Cuba. Negotiations by fits and starts broke down, the Cuban government finally refused any landing permits, and “The Ship of Fools” was denied entrance. A fate of death befell many on board and who were compelled to return to various European ports.

In addition to the Cuban government’s venality and corruption, there was of course, the traditional animus toward Jewish refugees. This was especially pronounced in Catholic countries where the clergy was under the influence of the then less than supportive Pope Pius the Twelfth. Such sentiments were fueled by patterns of Jewish migration to the Americas after World War One. Immigration restrictions were tightened in the United States, especially after 1924. As a result, large numbers of Eastern and Central Europeans found their way to Cuba, on the unwarranted presumption that after one year of residency on the island, migration to the United States as part of the immigration quota would be routine if not automatic. This inability of these new immigrants to root themselves in the Cuban world was hardly a show of commitment in the new land, and this show of alienation was reciprocated with passivity, if not active hostility by the native population. While a small percentage of Jewish migrants did establish business and professional activities, the desire to reach the United States was clearly the dominant factor among the Jewish arrivals.

At the same time, the flow of Jews from the United States to Cuba, in the interwar period also contributed to something less than perfect relations between Jewish immigrants and Cuban hosts. Booms in gambling, casinos, and a variety of forms of deviance, including drugs and prostitution, had a Jewish component—sometimes greater in the imagination of the hosts than it was in fact, but nonetheless real. This also served to distinguish migrants and natives and served to inhibit Jewish participation in the Cuban political processes toward democratization that occurred in the 1930s. With such a lethal combination of immigration as a temporary transit

point, criminal activity as a way of gaining a measure of security in a booming Cuban gray market, and traditional clerical hostility to alien religions at one level and political wariness to foreign nationals, including the United States, at another, the grounds of anti-Semitism were established before the seizure of power by Fidel Castro and his allies.

Cuba's Jewish Community has been described by Jay Levinson, author of *The Jewish Community of Cuba* in terms of "The Golden Years, 1906–1958." The truth is that such a definition makes sense only in terms of Jewish organized life around its synagogues and burial grounds, but not with respect to terms of full participation as a national of the country. Indeed, such participation was absurd on the face of it, since the regime was essentially a dictatorship run by Fulgencio Batista, and could not be thought of as a regime open to democratic processes whatever the Jewish community might have preferred or desired. In any event, those so-called golden years soon turned to ashes. After Fidel Castro came to power, the overwhelming majority of the Jewish professional community left for the United States, Puerto Rico and other parts of Latin America, while its businesses were confiscated as part of the general anti-capitalist spirit of the new regime. Many of these businesses and people were transplanted to the United States, Florida in particular, with astonishing success. The Cuban people to start with were among the most advanced in terms of technological skills in the region. They wear with pride the designation: "the Jews of the Caribbean." Its Jewish component was simply an add-on to what already were a highly resourceful and innovative people—when given half a chance to be so.

Marxism–Leninism

The rise to power of the Castro government and transformation of a guerrilla movement into a source of organized State power brought this era of ethnic toleration to an end. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 was mediated by an ideology—Marxism–Leninism. This is not the place for a full-scale exploration of the place of ideology in the affairs of the Castro regime. But it is worth noting how the role of anti-Semitism plays its hand in its formation. When it comes to the place of communist doctrine in the world of Castro, it is not Marx's effort in *The Communist Manifesto*, and its egalitarian impulses, but his effort five years earlier in 1843 *On The Jewish Question* and its blatant and deep-seated animosities for religion, which merits our attention. "We recognize in Judaism" Marx notes, "a general anti-social element of the present time, an element which through historical development—to which in this harmful respect the Jews have zealously contributed—has been brought to its present higher level, at which it must necessarily begin to disintegrate. In the final analysis, the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism. The Jew has already emancipated himself in a Jewish way." Beneath Marx's Hegelian smoke was the anti-Semitic fire of the uneasy and uncertain family convert. For Marx, the Jew as bourgeois has "emancipated" himself in civil terms. The task was to eliminate Judaism itself as part of the effort at political emancipation from capitalism. In this scenario, one does not need Jews to stand in opposition to Judaism. Castro's Cuba without Jews fits the bill to perfection.

Nor is such theorizing a function of abstract theory. Castro had a long gestation period under Soviet tutelage—and that included the Stalinist legacy in which Jews were subject to special treatment: from the denial of their special victimization at the hands of the Nazi regime to a removal of Jewish scholars from the sciences and Jewish organizational life as a force unto itself, and a denial of emigration rights to Jews in particular. The frequent charge of “cosmopolitanism” in the xenophobic world of Great Russian chauvinism was a virtual code word for being Jewish, or better, anti-national. It permitted Soviet authorities to isolate and if necessary disgrace delegations and visitations from Israel.

The Soviet Press became a critical instrument in anti-Semitism, reaching a fevered pitch in identifying the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States with the Zionist Secret Service. In all such calumnies, not a single statement was ever uttered by the Castro regime in denial or rejection of such calumnies. Indeed, they were repeated faithfully and repeatedly in the propaganda organs of the Cuban Communist Party. The Soviets provided Cuba with the model of attacking human rights activities and organizations as a necessary extension of the Jewish Zionist conspiracy.

The fusion of Cuban foreign policy with the extremist regimes of the Middle East dates back to the ideological hardening that took place after the Tri-continental meetings of the mid-1960s. The identification of Castro with forces dedicated to the destruction of Israel was made plain not only in proclamation, but also in practice. Direct military assistance was extended to Syria during the wars of 1967 and 1973. And while some question remains on whether Cuban troops were in the front lines in the tank corps, the advisory roles of Cuba is uncontested. Indeed, at the Havana 1966 meetings of the Tri-continental, the role of the Middle East as a bulwark against United States imperialism was reaffirmed. The Cuban position is that the war on terrorism is actually an example of “Liberation Imperialism.” There is not a single reference to the repeated assaults on Israel, or the actual causes of the Middle East conflict—the denial of the right of Israel to exist as a nation-State in the region. Instead we are informed by the Cuban spokesman, Sabah Alnasseri, that “The war on Iraq broke an axis, which was in the forming between Iran, Iraq and Syria—and probably Turkey with its Islamic government—and which could have reinforced the position of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine in face of Israel.”

In short, the struggle in the Middle East is between oil rich independent nations and the United States–Israeli effort to impose “neo-liberal conquest strategies of strong states and barbarized conditions on a world scale.” While the rhetoric is far more in tune with classical Marxism–Leninism than one hears from Iranian or Syrian authorities, the consequences in terms of geopolitical alignments are the same: a denial of terrorism as a factor, and a rejection of the struggle against terrorist forces, as in any way acceptable, much less legitimate.

The Cuban Propaganda Machine

The ratcheting up of the Cuba propaganda machine is complex and at times tortured. It must display unflinching loyalty to the dictatorial regimes in the Middle East,

whether secular or clerical, and also distinguish its position from those regimes by avoiding the over identification of Israel as a nation and the Jewish people as a world historic religion. Cuba's essential ploy in this regard is to identify the Israeli response to the Hezbollah forces in Southern Lebanon as itself genocidal. Thus *Radio Havana* in its July 1st message states that "not even the Nazis undertook a retaliation of such proportions against a civilian population." The response to guerrilla insurgency in the Gaza region is seen "as the army of Israel proceeding with its work of extermination" and identifies this struggle as "part of the fascist designs over the Palestinian people" (*Mesa Redonda*, July 28th). And finally, "the Zionist regime has shielded itself behind the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier to intensify their genocide of the Palestinian people" (*Radio Habana*, July 28th).

The Cuban organs of communication constantly identify Israeli actions with United States "flagrant complicity and perfidy... which guarantees the impunity of the aggressor regime." This statement released by the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs on August 4th, follows from an earlier release on July 18th that "the real purpose are the hegemonic plans of Tel Aviv and Washington to dominate all the energy resources in the area." The emphasis on petroleum resources as the real source of the conflict in the Middle East accords well with the Marxist vision of economic determinants on all conflicts in which "imperialism" engages. Another statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs links Europe to American designs. "The armaments with which this genocide is being committed are supplied by the United States... With rare exceptions, the European Union has served as an accomplice and has accepted the bland statements imposed by the Empire on the other side of the Atlantic." This linkage of Europe to America is seen as "the shameful and cowardly passivity of the European Union."

The Cuban propaganda machine, following the lead of Hezbollah and Iran, identified the cessation of hostilities by "the military hordes of the Israeli government" as a huge defeat for Israel and the West. "The myth of her invulnerability, fabricated by themselves and spread by their powerful allies, began in 1948, when they made the world believe that a militia of colonists installed in Palestine could defeat five Arab armies." And in a rare departure from distinguishing Jews from Israelis, the Radio Havana report of August 7th went on to note that "the legend grew when the arrogant Jews, armed to the teeth by the United States and allied with France and Great Britain, defeated Egypt in 1956." Increasingly, as the month long conflict unfolded, the Cuban information ministries and press ceased speaking of Israel and increasingly spoke the language of the *Jihadist* militants: of "the Zionist entity" and/or the "occupying power." This represents a significant departure from the previous Cuban position that was careful to distinguish the Jewish faith from the Israeli government, and indeed, unlike the radical Islamist states, continued to speak of Israel at least as a fact on the ground.

One great difficulty for the Marxist–Leninist regime is identifying the conflict in the Middle East in theological or apocalyptic terms. Itself a country largely Catholic in its population, Cuba was and remains hard put to see the "solution" of the issues in terms of the universal conversion of Christians and Crusaders into the Islamic faith. So what is missing in all Cuban analysis is the meaning of martyrdom, the immolation of warriors of Islam, and as one might expect, even a hint that any irrational element might be at work in the denial of the Holocaust or the effort to

create a new Holocaust in the statements and actions of the Iranian sponsored terrorists in Southern Lebanon. The furious slaughters that are daily occurrences within Iraq between Shiites and Sunnis, between terror bandits and police, or assassinations of leaders attempting to force a legitimate government, likewise are seen as not fit for the propaganda radar screen. There is no mention of Hezbollah or Hamas, and just as telling, no sense of ongoing efforts to reach a pacific accommodation between contending forces.

The Castro government has in the past routinely cartooned Israeli figures in terms of hooked nosed caricatures dancing to the tune of Uncle Sam. But it tended to stay clear of outright assaults on Jewish sensibilities. That has now been replaced by a strong dose of anti-Semitism, of the sort common during the Stalinist era—in which Jewish interests are seen as cosmopolitan elements disloyal to the national interest of the people, whoever they may be. The sole reason given for Jewish existence is to participate in the imperial plunder of poor nations with rich mineral resources. The de-legitimizing of Israel is now close to the official Arab extremist position. Israel is viewed as a nation without proper authority and one whose very right to exist is in grave question. It also accords with the strong adaptation of anti-Semitism as the official policy of Hugo Chavez and the oil-producing giant, Venezuela.

The strong allegiance demonstrated in the past by a heavily populated American Left intelligentsia has been left in tatters by the new developments in the Middle East. Once again, in Castro's Cuba, as in Stalin's Russia seventy years earlier, the fixation of belief in revolutionary utopias has been exposed as a terrible fraud with high risk consequences. This may be a small by-product of the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah, but in American terms, it is highly consequential. On a smaller scale, the emergence of a Cuban identification with an unsavory group of terrorists and true believers, blurs the classical gap between a communist left and a fascist right. The strong Jewish support evident in the emergence of the Castro regime has become silent, if not exactly repentant, of its past endorsements in the air and participations on the ground.

Anti-Semitism is so powerfully rooted as a cultural element in authoritarian cultures that even when, as in the case of Cuban Communism, it entails the tortured twisting of doctrinal elements within Marxism–Leninism, such as doctrinal claims about the “materialist foundations of society,” its leaders will sacrifice the ideology to the reality. The fusion of *Jihadist* acts of revenge and terror, the instance on the supreme role of Islamist belief as a test of moral worth, and the virtual negation of popular rule as a test for regime worth, all become part of the common struggle against Israel as a nation and Judaism as a cultural tradition.

For a world that has witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany and the systematic decomposition of Jewish life in Bolshevik Russia, the new wave of warfare upon the singular democracy in the Middle East and the calumny heaped upon its people—even by European powers that should now know better—is a grim reminder that moral progress lags far behind technological advances.

Note The information gathered from the Cuba press and broadcasts is provided by *Cuba Facts* (Issue No. 24, August 2006), which is part of the Cuba Transition Project of the United States Agency of International Development and the University of Miami. The ongoing efforts of this service merit professional respect and appreciation as well as personal acknowledgment.

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